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Management as a Liberal Art (Summary)

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Management as a Liberal Art

Peter Drucker has suggested that over the last 100 years, management has transformed the social and economic fabric of the world's developed countries and has contributed to the creation of a global economy. He considered the development of management as a discipline to be one of his most important contributions.

As a discipline, management has allowed us to convert knowledge into a capital resource. As a discipline, it has involved the understanding and development of various organizational structures, procedures, methods, and systems as part of getting the right things done through the combined effort of people with a diversity of knowledge, skills, talents, race, and gender.

Drucker has reminded us; however, that as a discipline, management is also a liberal art. Its object is a human community and it always must deal with the understanding and development of the human condition, including its spiritual dimension and the reality that people can do good or evil, and right or wrong.

As management focuses on results, it also involves people outside the organization, the people served by the enterprise – a satisfied customer of a business firm, a healed patient of a hospital, and a knowledgeable student of a school.

The discipline of management as a liberal art is about the development of the whole person (not just a pair of hands). It's about developing skills and talents, but also people's character, integrity, a spirit of giving back and putting the interests of others ahead of their own interest. It's about treating people as the subject of work, not just the object of work. It's about understanding who people

are and why they work, not just what they do and how they do it. It's about the development of human capital as a resource and product of the firm.

Drucker concluded that, to be effective, a manager must be able to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences of psychology, philosophy, economics, history, ethics and spiritual values. He recognized that people are not just biological and physiological beings, but are also spiritual beings who are created and exist for the purposes of their Creator and are subject to Him.

I suggest that the practice of management as a liberal art raises the question of God and the need for a person's response to that question. It does not, nor should it, demand a uniform or corporate response. But it does require an individual response and understanding of one's source of authority for determining moral behavior and a purpose and meaning for work and for life.

In Drucker's words, our human nature is "imperfect, weak, a sinner, and dust destined unto dust; yet made in God's image and responsible for our actions."

C.S. Lewis referred to an added dimension of the human condition when he said, "There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit."

This concept of immortality combined with the reality that most people will spend most of their waking hours in the work environment adds to the importance of understanding and applying management as a liberal art and a recognition that there is a responsibility to develop the whole person, including who they are becoming.

The practice of management as a liberal art also requires moral leadership of the firm.

Leadership that is transparent and is willing to serve and lead by example.

Leadership that has a moral compass and source for truth and moral authority.

Leadership that recognizes that it is not so much about the leader or what the leader wants in title or position; but, it is more about the people who follow and the direction they are being led. As one looks at leadership in this way, it is imperative for the leader to know what he or she believes and why they believe it, to know where they are headed and why it is important for people to follow. To be an example in their private and public life for the practice of right behavior. To be always willing to walk in the shoes of those they lead. To recognize as Drucker has said that "Leadership is just a means, to what end is the real question".

spiritual development? Why isn't this also part of the social responsibility of the firm, what Drucker has called the social function of management?

Is management being taught as a liberal art? Are there best case examples of where it is so taught? Should management as a liberal art be an essential component of an MBA curriculum? Is it only applicable for institutions of higher learning that have a "religious" orientation? Are there business models that can be examined to determine the appropriateness and effective application of this principle? Was ServiceMaster such a model? How does leadership or the tone from the top influence the effective application of the principle?

Should one invest time and money in the further study, research, development and promotion of the principle?

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